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Request for the inclusion of an additional item in the agenda of the fifty-ninth session

Observer status for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in the General Assembly

Letter dated 12 October 2004 from the representatives of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In accordance with rule 15 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, we have the honour to request the inclusion in the agenda of the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly of an additional item entitled "Observer status for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in the General Assembly".

An explanatory memorandum (annex I) in support of the above request and a draft resolution (annex II) are attached to the present letter, in accordance with rule 20 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

We further have the honour to request that the present letter be circulated as a document of the General Assembly.

(*Signed*) Iftekhar Ahmed **Chowdhury**
Permanent Representative of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

(*Signed*) Daw **Penjo**
Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan

(*Signed*) Nirupam **Sen**
Permanent Representative of India

(*Signed*)Mohamed **Latheef**
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Maldives

(*Signed*) Murari Raj **Sharma**
Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Nepal

(*Signed*) Munir **Akram**
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

(*Signed*) Bernard Anton Bandara **Goonatilleke**
Chargé d'affaires of the Permanent Mission of the
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Annex I

Explanatory memorandum

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

1. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) representing the seven countries of South Asia, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, was launched with the adoption of its Charter at the first-ever summit meeting of the South Asian Heads of State or Government in Dhaka in December 1985.

2. The objectives of the Association as enunciated in its Charter are as follows:

- To promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life
- To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realize their full potential
- To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia
- To contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems
- To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields
- To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries
- To strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interests
- To cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.

3. Regional cooperation among the States members of the Association is governed by the following principles as contained in its Charter:

- Cooperation within the framework of the Association is based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and mutual benefit
- Such cooperation is to complement and not substitute for bilateral or multilateral cooperation
- Such cooperation should be consistent with the bilateral and multilateral obligations of member States.

4. The highest authority of the Association rests with the SAARC Heads of State or Government who meet annually at the summit level. To date, 12 Summits have been held: Dhaka (1985), Bangalore (1986), Kathmandu (1987), Islamabad (1988), Malé (1990), Colombo (1991), Dhaka (1993), New Delhi (1995), Malé (1997), Colombo (1998), Kathmandu (2002) and Islamabad (2004).

5. Comprising the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of SAARC member States, the Council of Ministers is responsible for formulating the policies of the Association; reviewing the progress of regional cooperation; deciding on new areas of cooperation; establishing additional mechanisms as deemed necessary; and deciding on other matters of general interest to the Association. The Council, which reports to the Heads of State or Government, is expected to meet twice a year and may also meet in extraordinary sessions by agreement among member States. It has held 24 regular sessions so far. Informal meetings of the Council are also held on the sidelines of the sessions of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

6. The Standing Committee consisting of the Foreign Secretaries of SAARC member States is entrusted with the task of overall monitoring and coordination of programmes; approving projects and programmes, and modalities of their financing; determining intersectoral priorities; mobilizing regional and external resources; and identifying new areas of cooperation. It meets as often as deemed necessary and reports to the Council of Ministers. It has to date held 29 regular sessions and 4 special sessions. The Standing Committee is assisted by the Programming Committee comprising senior officials of member States and has held 24 sessions to date.

7. At present, seven Technical Committees pursue regional cooperation in the identified areas. The areas covered by these Technical Committees include agriculture and rural development (including livestock and fisheries); health and population activities (including nutrition and drug-related issues); women, youth and children; environment and forestry; science and technology, and meteorology; human resources development (including education, skill development, arts, culture and sports); and transport (including land, water, railway and civil aviation). Besides, five Working Groups have been established in the agreed areas covering telecommunications, and information and communication technology; biotechnology; intellectual property rights (including traditional knowledge); tourism; and energy.

8. Poverty alleviation has been declared as the overarching goal of all SAARC activities. An Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation reconstituted by the Eleventh SAARC Summit (2002) continues to play an advocacy role and is poised to prepare a comprehensive and realistic blueprint setting out SAARC development goals for the next five years in the areas of poverty alleviation, education, health and environment based on its report, entitled "Our future: our responsibility", which it presented to the Twelfth SAARC Summit (2004). A Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation approved by the Twelfth SAARC Summit (2004) is currently under implementation.

9. The Committee on Economic Cooperation comprising Commerce Secretaries of SAARC member States oversees regional cooperation in the economic sector. The Committee has so far held 11 meetings. Periodic meetings of SAARC Commerce Ministers formulate policy guidelines to promote cooperation in the field. Consultations among member States in this area have culminated in the signing of Agreements on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (1993) and the South Asian Free Trade Area (2004). A Committee of Experts is now working to fully realize the South Asian Free Trade Area, which is to come into force on 1 January 2006.

10. The Eleventh SAARC Summit (2002) agreed to the vision of a phased and planned process eventually leading to a South Asian Economic Union (SAEU). The Twelfth SAARC Summit (2004) has since reiterated the Association's commitment to SAEU through creation of a suitable political and economic environment in the region.

11. Since the establishment of the Association, a number of ministerial-level meetings have been held to focus on specific areas of common concern to its member States. These meetings have now become an integral part of the Association's consultative structure. The subjects so far covered by these meetings include trade and commerce; international economic issues; children; women's issues; health; environment; disabled persons; youth; poverty alleviation; housing; agriculture; tourism; information; communications; and culture.

12. The States members of the Association have signed the following regional agreements and conventions: Agreement on Establishing the SAARC Food Security Reserve (1987); Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (1987); Regional Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1990); Agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (1993); SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002); SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia (2002); Agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area (2004); Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (2004); and SAARC Social Charter (2004).

13. The Association has to its credit five regional centres established in different SAARC capitals, namely, the SAARC Agricultural Information Centre (Dhaka); SAARC Tuberculosis Centre (Kathmandu); SAARC Meteorological Research Centre (Dhaka); SAARC Documentation Centre (New Delhi); SAARC Human Resource Development Centre (Islamabad). In addition to these, the Twelfth SAARC Summit (2004) has given the go-ahead for the establishment of three more regional centres in member States: SAARC Information Centre (Kathmandu); SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre (Malé); and SAARC Cultural Centre (Colombo).

14. A SAARC-Audio Visual Exchange (SAVE) Committee established under the auspices of the Association disseminates information about it and its member States through regular radio and television programmes.

15. The Association has instituted two awards, namely, the SAARC Youth Award and the SAARC Award, catering respectively to the youth and the nationals and institutions of its member States excelling in the fields of research and innovations, peace, development, poverty alleviation and other areas of regional cooperation. In addition, a SAARC Internship Programme is in place to enable South Asian scholars and researchers to undertake studies about the Association and its activities.

16. Besides the official-level cooperation among its member States, the Association promotes regional cooperation in the private sector as well. With this end in view, the Association grants recognition to civil society groups under two categories: Regional Apex Bodies and SAARC Recognized Bodies. The former category of professional bodies so far recognized by the Association includes the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), SAARCLAW and South Asian Federation of Accountants, while the latter embodies regional associations

like the SAARC Federation of University Women; Association of Management and Development Institutions; South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation of Architects; SAARC Cardiac Society; SAARC Association of Town Planners; Federation of State Insurance Organizations of SAARC Countries; SAARC Diploma Engineers' Forum; Radiological Society of SAARC Countries; SAARC Teachers' Federation; SAARC Surgical Care Society; Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature; and SAARC Association of Dermatologists, Venereologists and Leprologists.

17. The Association's Secretariat is based in Kathmandu and is headed by the Secretary-General, who is appointed by the Council of Ministers upon nomination by a member State on the basis of the principle of rotation in alphabetical order.

18. In accordance with the Charter objective, the Association promotes collaboration with other regional and international organizations, many of which belong to the United Nations system. The Association has so far entered into agreements/memorandums of understanding with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; United Nations Children's Fund; Asia Pacific Telecommunity; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; United Nations Development Programme; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; European Commission; International Telecommunication Union; Canadian International Development Agency; World Health Organization; United Nations Development Fund for Women; and Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt. Following the directive of the Twelfth SAARC Summit (2004) to develop mutually beneficial links between SAARC and other regional and international organizations, bodies and States outside the region, the Association is all set to pursue collaborative activities and where applicable to sign partnership agreements/memorandums of understanding with organizations like the World Bank; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; United Nations Environment Programme; South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme; Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre; Association of Southeast Asian Nations; United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS; Asian Development Bank; United Nations Industrial Development Organization; and United Nations Population Fund.

19. Since 1997, the Association has been holding interactive sessions at the ministerial level with the European Union and ASEAN on the sidelines of the sessions of the General Assembly in New York. The SAARC Foreign Ministers also meet informally during the General Assembly sessions. The Association is currently working on the possibility of convening an informal meeting of the Foreign Ministers of SAARC and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries on the sidelines of the General Assembly session in September 2004, which is also expected to be a regular event in the years ahead. Besides, availing himself of the opportunity of his presence in New York during General Assembly sessions, the Secretary-General of SAARC meets senior officials of the United Nations and heads of United Nations agencies there.

20. As is evident from the above, SAARC has institutional arrangements for cooperation with a number of United Nations agencies. However, with the United Nations itself, no such arrangement is in place. In order to redress this lacuna experienced by the Association, the SAARC Council of Ministers, at its twenty-fourth session, preceding the Twelfth SAARC Summit in Islamabad in January 2004, authorized the Secretary-General to immediately initiate the necessary process

of obtaining observer status with the United Nations, enabling the General Assembly, at its fifty-ninth session in September/October 2004, to take a decision on the matter.

21. SAARC is convinced that attaining observer status with the United Nations will enhance its profile as a regional association in the international community. Moreover, such status will not only act as an incentive to strengthen the existing collaboration between SAARC and United Nations agencies but will also qualify the former for an advantageous working relationship with the latter in the years ahead. Besides, such an arrangement is expected to facilitate the Association's own participation in and its interactions with other regional and international organizations during the sessions of the General Assembly in New York.

Annex II

Draft resolution

Observer status for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in the General Assembly

The General Assembly,

Wishing to promote cooperation between the United Nations and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation,

1. *Decides* to invite the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to participate in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly in the capacity of observer;

2. *Requests* the Secretary-General to take the necessary action to implement the present resolution.